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Strategic Insight

After Arafat

by [Glenn Robinson](#)

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Israel's assault on West Bank Palestinian towns throughout April 2002 and its even longer siege and then occupation of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat's presidential compound in Ramallah, have raised legitimate questions about how long Arafat will remain in power in Palestine. After all, Arafat is already older than King Husayn of Jordan and Hafiz al-Asad of Syria were at the time of their deaths in recent years, and Arafat has suffered from a number of physical ailments, particularly since his near-fatal plane crash in Libya. In addition to the ravages of time, Arafat must also worry about assassination attempts, either from Palestinian dissidents or Israeli commandoes. Even as the siege of Arafat is coming to an end, the questions of his physical longevity and of political succession in Palestine only intensify. The intent of this essay is not to predict which personality will eventually succeed Arafat, but rather to outline some of the major issues that will define the succession process when it occurs.

Succession for what exactly?

Arafat currently wears four different political hats: he is the duly elected president (*al-ra'is*) of the Palestinian Authority, the interim government on the West Bank and Gaza Strip; he is the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); he is the head of the major faction within the PLO, Fatah; and, as is usually forgotten, he is the president of the State of Palestine that was officially declared by the PLO in 1988. The first point to be made about succession is that the era of one man's domination of all the major posts in the Palestinian national movement will come to an end upon Arafat's death. Different leaders will more than likely fill these posts and, potentially, rival leaders may fill them. Whether this will represent democratization at the leadership level or fragmentation of the movement will depend on the context in which it happens. Even in the unlikely event that one man fills multiple leadership posts in the post-Arafat era, it is inconceivable that he will enjoy the same concentration of power that Arafat has garnered over the years.

Context is Everything

Assuming that the real interest in succession concerns the position of political head of the Palestinian polity or state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, then the second general point is this: the context in which succession occurs is utterly critical in determining its outcome. If Arafat dies peacefully in his sleep in five years' time when he is the president of a Palestine that is at peace with its neighbors, then it is likely that succession will be peaceful and legally executed. If, on the other hand, Arafat is assassinated next week by Israeli sharpshooters, or killed by internal dissidents in the midst of accusations of "selling out" to Israel, then it is much more likely that succession will be violent and extra-legal. Thus, the context and timing of Arafat's death will be critical in determining whether men with guns come to power, or a legal process brings a popular leader to power. This in turn will tell us much about the future of Palestinian politics.

On paper, the legal process for choosing a new PA president is straightforward: the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, or parliament, (currently Abu 'Ala) holds office for 60 days during which time new popular elections are held. However, for this process to proceed all parties must ignore legal

realities -- which they probably would. Legal reality #1 is that all of the institutions created by the Oslo process (including the PLC, its Speaker, and the Ra'is) officially expired in May 1999. The Oslo accords were explicitly limited to a maximum of five years from the creation of the PA (which formally occurred in May 1994 in Cairo with the signing of the 'Gaza-Jericho' agreement). Legal reality #2 is that the basic law that governs succession in the Palestinian Authority has never been formally promulgated. Thus, in order for the legal succession to proceed, the speaker of a body that technically does not exist (the PLC) will apply a law that does not formally exist to hold elections for a position (president) whose legal standing is likewise in doubt. Of course, gentlemen's agreements to keep these institutions in place have occurred, and politics will always trump legal niceties, but the dubious legal nature of the existing institutions of the PA should not be ignored in any succession discussion.

Two Elites

While the context in which succession takes place will go a long way in determining which leader ultimately emerges, we can point to the major political cleavage which will be the dividing line of competition. That cleavage is not the secular-religious divide of the PLO and Hamas, although one cannot dismiss its importance. Rather, the dominant cleavage of succession will be between the "Oslo elite" and the "Intifada elite", or what others have called the "old guard" and "new" or "young" guard. The Oslo elite represents the old leaders of the PLO, beginning with Arafat himself, but including many other top Palestinian officials such as Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), Ahmad Qur'ei (Abu 'Ala), and Nabil Sha'th. These men have lived most of their lives in exile, many since 1982 in Tunisia where the PLO headquarters were located (which is why they are often referred to by fellow Palestinians as the "Tunisians"), and many are getting rather old. It was this old guard that made peace with Israel in 1993 -- the Oslo accord -- from their homes in exile.

Conversely, the "Intifada elite" -- or new guard -- was born and raised in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and has had a very different life history than its Oslo elders. Members of this group tend to be economically poorer but better educated, and know Israel much more intimately than do those old leaders coming back from exile. Some, like Marwan Barghouti, speak excellent Hebrew. These are people quite willing to make peace with Israel or to fight with Israel, but who hold no particular illusions about Israel's occupation. They have also been the most outspoken critics of the authoritarianism and corruption practiced by the PA. It was the young guard who fought Israel in the first Intifada, or uprising, in 1987-93 -- a largely unarmed resistance -- and it is this same young guard that led the current and much more violent al-Aqsa Intifada. This group also built the pluralistic institutions of civil society in Palestine. In short, it is a much more modern elite than Arafat and his cohorts, and better able to mobilize Palestinian society at the grassroots level -- because that is where they grew up. This elite will be much harder to cut a peace deal with, but much more likely to make a good deal stick.

The competition between these two sets of political elites will largely determine succession and the future of Palestinian politics. It is in part a generational struggle, but more importantly a sociological conflict between two very different types of elites with different visions and different "rules of the political game." And given that the Oslo elite's chief political project -- the "peace process" of recent years -- has been so utterly discredited in Palestinian eyes (having only led to more settlements and more land confiscations by Israel), it is a good bet that Arafat's successor will come from the ranks of the home-grown Intifada elite.

Will Succession Change Anything?

The obvious answer to this question is yes; the passing of "Mr. Palestine", the man who has so symbolized Palestinian politics for over three decades, cannot help but have an impact. On a deeper, more structural level, however, Arafat's death may not significantly change the basics of Palestinian politics. The vast imbalance of power between Israel and Palestine will outlive Arafat, so the basic hegemonic nature of any peace process will remain intact. Moreover, as I have argued at some length elsewhere, the basic political economy in Palestine will lend itself strongly to the kind of soft authoritarianism practiced by Arafat and the PA well into the future. Palestine, much like the oil states of

the Gulf, is a "rentier state" where money flows from the top down, with very little extraction of taxes from society by the PA. This gives social forces very little leverage to push for democratic openings. Mr. Arafat's death will not change this basic fact.

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